

Revised, 9/20/2017

Seeing in the Dark. Seeing in the dark. Darkness gets such bad press in our culture and its fecund beauty is so rich in wisdom, in spiritual evolution toward living more fully, more consciously.

When did you last step out under a night sky to gaze at the moon or see Venus gleaming in the West after sunset? When have you last been in a place where you could see the spangled Milky Way veil the firmament? Have you ever walked midnight miles with glow of starshine your only light? Do you live by wax or wane of moonshine? I remember last March a night I walked a footpath alone as snow swirled around me and silence, save for the wind, enveloped me—the rapture of solitude in snowstormy darkness....

The wonders of the night, the splendor of darkness—that which some First Nations call the black light—bring perspective to the toil and turmoil of our days. The luminous galactic whorls of the night have given meaning and delight, prophecy and song to our humanity since the dawn of human existence. The starmap helps us know who we are, as individuals, as clans, as homo sapiens sapiens. Humans who know we know.... And more and more across our planet we are losing the night sky, the other half of who we are, to glare of light of so-called civilization. More and more we push back the power and majesty of darkness, the wisdom teachings she offers, with artificial lighting and computer devices that give us violence and alt-facts instead of awe and a deep sense of belonging in relationship to something infinitely more creative and diverse than we might ever imagine, the Great Mystery.

Homo sapiens sapiens: we the species aware of our existence and more than that, aware of the fact we will someday, somehow die. I am not at all sure we are the only beings on the planet who know that, but for now most scientists believe that is so. We think we know so much—yet that is what may bring our ultimate

Fall. Not Eve in the Garden eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, but our hubris, our arrogant assertion that we know enough, if not all there is to know. Indeed what kind of Creator would want any of her creations to be less than they are, to deny their potential, to abide by capriciously imposed limits? To live in fear and suspicion?

The universe is composed of 96% Dark Matter and Dark Energy—none of which we understand at all, actually its mysteries comprise the next threshold of discovery in quantum physics. Four percent of the universe is composed of what we know as “ordinary” matter—that which we call real, which we see and know even if only through electron microscopes, Hubble telescopes and super-colliders. 96% Dark Matter and Dark Energy, and it is those complementary forces that help hold the universe together. All that unknown, massive, potent and unknowable Darkness. Darkness without which we would not exist —just as we would not exist without the stars, whose dust shimmers in our very cells.

So why all this talk of night and darkness and our relationship to them? Because I think they have everything to do with where we find ourselves emotionally, mentally, spiritually and politically right now. I think our fear of the dark, our lack of appreciation and understanding for the beauty and power and healing of times of darkness, has brought us to a time of “Turning and turning in the widening gyre; // The falcon cannot hear the falconer; // Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold...” Thank you, Master Yeats-- When fear runs amok and the fascination with easy solutions allures like the siren’s call...when leaders have lost their moral compass and seek scapegoats for those who rage to escape from chaotic times. When the foundations of power are ignorance and greed, a combination that corrupts absolutely. Not that there aren’t some horrifyingly humorous moments—I was rather glad to know Frederick Douglass might be alive among us—talk about Black light! I’m rather surprised he hasn’t weighed in on Charlottesville! So yes—sometimes some black humor is a necessary, temporary balm....

Make no mistake--this all has everything to do with spiritual work, spiritual solutions, and spiritual relationships—including our relationship to everything Dark. It is work we must do in the bosom of our spiritual communities. And should you balk at the word “spiritual”, know that all it connotes is how we make meaning of the whirling constellation comprised of events, people, emotions, and the cosmos as it influences and impacts our lives. I submit this may be not a time for turning to the light, but a time for turning inward, into our personal darkness; a time to reflect on our personal and national Shadows; a time to savor the sanity the sweet night offers us.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre...the spiraling irrationality of hatred and blame, of slashing attacks on the amazing, enlightened document we call our nation’s Constitution. A document written when leaders of the time extended their days only by candlelight, when every person was familiar with the wonders and gifts of the night.

We are warned by newspaper columnists that with current administrators our nation is slipping into fascism step by incremental step. A recent issue of our very own UU World has an article by a Yale historian that spells out for us 20 ways in which we must prepare for and resist that fascism. We have never seen anything like this—our democracy downgraded by the Economist Intelligence Unit to the likes of those in Argentina and the Philippines, “flawed democracies”—this happens in other countries, banana republics, not our steady and enlightened United States!

So what are we to do? Yes, we must act—and we must find ways to hold our center. And the wisdom teachers all tell us the only way to do that in times like these is to go inward, become grounded and still, to feel the solid Earth, spinning though she is, beneath our feet. The paradox is that in our opening, our surrender to that Creative Intelligent Source of the universe, we find our liberation. Our freedom lies in our personal pursuit of evolving consciousness—where we will find greater capacity for love and compassion and justice, rooted in personal spiritual solitude and the teachings of wise ones gone before.

We cannot not be in relationship—to every quark, photon, boson and element of the Dark Matter and Energy—to the “diaphany of the divine at the heart of the universe on fire”, thank you Teilhard de Chardin for my image of God—we cannot not be in relationship, and it is in relationship to that divine diaphany and each other that we will find our salvation in these harrowing times. And real relationship, real communion, requires that we make the inward journey to know ourselves. Rilke wisely tells us, “Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other.” Two solitudes—two who deeply know who they are as individuals—the inward journey into our souls’ complexity.

One of the uplifting and challenging books I’ve been reading the past weeks is AN INTERRUPTED LIFE AND LETTERS FROM WESTERBORK. The author, Etty Hillesum, was a secular Dutch Jew, a doctor of law and a student of philosophy in the 1930’s. She has left us a most amazing document of compassion and spiritual evolution in her diaries and letters from those times, until with her last written words, flung on a postcard from a train to Auschwitz, she disappeared into the German killing fields. She writes of the power and salvation of love. She writes, “All disasters stem from us. Why is there a war? Perhaps because now and then I might be inclined to snap at my neighbor. Because I and my neighbor and everyone else do not have enough love. Yet we could fight war and all its excrescences by releasing, each day, the love that is shackled inside us and giving it a chance to live. And I believe that I will never be able to hate any human being for his so-called wickedness, that I shall only hate the evil that is within me, though hate is perhaps putting it too strongly even then. In any case, we cannot be lax enough in what we demand of others and strict enough in what we demand of ourselves. (Repeat the last...)

“Yes, the trees, sometimes at night their branches would bow down under the weight of the fruit of the stars, and now they are menacing daggers piercing the bright spring air. Yet even in their new shape and setting they are unspeakably beautiful. I remember a walk along an Amsterdam canal, one dreamlike summer night long, long ago. I had visions then of ruined cities. I saw old cities vanish and new cities arise, and I thought to myself, even if the whole of

this world is bombed to bits, we shall build a new world, and that one too will pass, and still life will be beautiful, always beautiful.” And later she writes, “Humiliation always involves two. The one who does the humiliating, and the one who allows himself to be humiliated. If the second is missing, that is, if the passive part is immune to humiliation, then the humiliation vanishes into thin air. All that remains are vexatious measures that interfere with daily life but are not humiliations that weigh heavily on the soul. We Jews should remember that...I find life beautiful, and I feel free. The sky within me is as wide as the one stretching above my head. I believe in God and I believe in man, and I say so without embarrassment. Life is hard, but that is no bad thing. If one starts by taking one’s own importance seriously, the rest follows...True peace will come only when every individual finds peace within himself; when we have all vanquished and transformed our hatred for our fellow human beings of whatever race—even into love one day, although perhaps that is asking too much. It is, however, the only solution. I am a happy person and I hold life dear indeed, in this year of Our Lord 1942, the umpteenth year of the war.”

Etty Hillesum learned to “safeguard that little piece of you, God, in ourselves” to use her words, and she grew into this place of love through concentrated times of solitude, prayer and contemplation, although she worked for the last year of her life in a transfer camp helping to stave off deportation to Auschwitz for many other Jews, until ultimately, of course she traveled with them to their deaths.

Etty went into the darkness of her own ego’s graspings and connivings to emerge through her soul’s deepest longings into a place of compassion and grace. It is the only way. We cannot arrive at valuing the worth and dignity of every person, as we UU’s profess we do in the first principle of our faith—the worth and dignity of every person, no exceptions!-- without going through the labyrinthine shadows of our own small egos.

Too, Etty understood that her personal journey offered others a path which to follow. She also intuitively understood what we now call quantum or morphogenic fields—through prayer and study she aligned with the field of love

and compassion that exists in universal ethers, thus strengthening her own capacity for love and leaving the field stronger in turn.

The morphogenic fields are part of our new cosmological awareness and they can transform our spiritual lives—transform us so we move through our daily rounds through resonance with the field that gives our lives meaning. Fields are no figment of mystical imagination, they are real quantum energetic fields of influence. They are energetic field patterns of the Divine Source, of God, and they are more fundamental than matter. A field holds energy and manifests it in myriad forms of matter. Your UU congregation creates its own energetic field, our entire denomination as well. Different schools create, by virtue of the energy present, their own unique fields, within a collective larger field. These are just examples—we move within and co-create fields throughout every day all our lives. To be sensitive to the field we inhabit and create is a path to transcendence of our smaller selves.

Etty Hillesum devotedly studied Jungian psychology and Jung described a cosmology of fields in his work: the concept of the collective unconscious, fields such as the divine feminine and fields of memory such as the collective unconscious imprinted with the holocaust of the burning times which exists as an active field within the bodies, hearts and minds of millions of women even today. The dominant fields of the warrior or priestly masculine that influence individuals and events within the larger context of history. Jung's statement, "Bidden or unbidden, God is present" is a statement of field awareness.

An essential element in shifting our nation away from the perils of fascism is our attunement with the morphogenic fields of love and justice and democratic process. And a healthy examination of the Shadow fields of racial and religious and able-body-and-mind bigotry. Yes, we must intellectually address our white privilege as an institutionally oppressive majority, but I believe the shift can only manifest with the power of what Gandhi called "satyagraha", translated truth-force or soul-force. That soul-rich truth-force became a field that toppled an empire. Dr. Martin Luther King's successes had everything to do with the fact that

The Movement was spiritually sourced, not merely an exercise in intellectual constitutional interpretation. Spiritually sourced, creating an energetic field of non-violent massive resistance. Something we are beginning to witness and participate in again in our nation. Some of us marched in the sixties and thought our battles were won—never dreaming we'd be taking to the streets again facing an administration more alarming than any in our lifetime.

The day of the women's march in DC after the inauguration was a full Field day! And the suffragist field that inspired women and men, a force field they tapped into, has been re-energized and massively expanded in the weeks since. Individual women marched, yes, but they also prayed their walk and soul-searched for a path of inclusion and compassion rather than bitterness and rage. Their anger was righteous in the way of a mighty stream and of justice rolling down like waters. It was not undirected and vengeful, it was spiritual—it was borne of meaning-making.

So, in this harrowing time for our nation, in this time of examining ourselves for the right path of action, we are asked to dig spiritually deeper. Some of us have always wondered whether we would have been as courageous in the face of the Nazis as those who hid Anne Frank's family, or those who smuggled Jews out of harm's way. Right now we have the opportunity to find out. For yes, the darkest soil, the coldest, darkest night offers us richly fertile ground for growth, and views of the most dazzling stars. Yes, we are asked to face our fears and hold a vision of the United States the founders embraced almost 250 years ago—even as they lived out their spiritual principles—when they adopted the Constitution.

We cannot stand to intentionally and collectively witness the ICE squads seize, imprison and deport immigrants unless we are grounded in deeply held spiritual beliefs. We cannot vote to become sanctuary churches unless we live out the UU principles of democracy and human worth. We cannot live out the truth that Black Lives Matter unless we are willing to face our own complicity in racism at every level, starting within our own hearts, and call for strength on the proud field of Unitarian and Universalist abolitionists and those martyred in the Field of the

Civil Rights Movement. We cannot sign a mandated registry as Muslims unless we truly understand with every cell of our beings our own sacred history of Universalism and the moral imperative that God is Love.

Most of all, we need to know what grounds and centers us—what nourishes and replenishes us. For the world needs folks who can be part of a compassionate conversation, not a hysterical harangue. We need to participate in the conversation with dignity and calm, with firm resolve, yes, and the intent to deeply listen. All the saber rattling, the xenophobia, the spewing hateful rhetoric is fear-based. We need to reassure people who are fearful; the only way to love our enemies is to recognize and disarm the enemies within—and we all have them, those demons. “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies...” Consider that this means we prepare to commune with our most powerful enemies—those that lie within our own hearts, our own frailties that we haplessly and recklessly project onto others. The psalmist asks us to be in relationship to our enemies within—for then we will hold no other as an enemy, for we will see there is no separation, we are all in our wild diversity, one.

For many of us the beauty of our planet home replenishes and nourishes. Witnessing with wonder and willingness in the natural realm enhances our connection with a field that belongs to everyone and everything, without exception or judgment. Mary Oliver is a high priestess of Earth-worshippers and I share with you her poem, MESSENGER:

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—
 equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me
 keep my mind on what matters,

which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be
astonished.

The phoebe, the delphinium.

The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.

Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here,

which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart
and these body-clothes,

a mouth with which to give shouts of joy

to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over, how it is
that we live forever.

“My work is loving the world.” Mary Oliver rests in the field of wonder and grace as she goes about her work of witnessing—and in her witness and willingness to be in thrall, she moves into the deepest spiritual relationship with All That Is. She becomes for us a prophet of a way in which we might learn to love, learn to accept, learn to honor and cherish. She helps us understand our loving relationship with our Earth Mother brings a flexible groundedness that helps us hold the center amid the spinning gyre. Poetry and image are languages of the soul—turn to the poets to find the sacredness of the dark, the holy centering of a compassionate heart.

And here’s another conundrum that we must address in all this talk of knowing the dark. We live in a world in which the internet has extended our reach of knowledge and linked us to people around the planet in instantaneous contact—sometimes even communication. The value of all that is incalculable, but in that technology there also lie demons. And they are mighty and insatiable. With the click of the key pad the grandeur of galaxies appears before me courtesy of Hubble photos. And I revel in that! But I know it is not the same as standing

beneath the stars on a mountainside. We expect instant gratification in our greed to know NOW!!, but we forget the antidote to the emptiness that fuels our longing lies in slowing down, not speeding up; in real communication in relationship, not in virtual “friendships”; in solitude that balances that communion, and in the allowing questions to mellow within us—perhaps savoring them and letting them work us—letting go of what really isn’t necessary.... In my work I counsel clients whose marriages are being wrecked by computer addictions, whose children’s school performance is suffering and who are both increasingly apathetic and increasingly impatient and violent because of their reliance on video games for most of their entertainment. Addictions. Scientists now know that the actual clicking is part of the addiction, like rats pressing the bar—the human brain triggered by the incessant clicks burns out its pleasure center so ever more rapid responses and extreme stimulation is needed—and there’s really no pleasure at all. This is fact, not some soft hypothesis. The GPS tells us where to turn next, but tells us nothing about the landscape of crossroads and hamlets that give us relationship. Sailors used to rely on stars and sextants—they understood the frail and fragile human situation **in relationship!** to the stars and planets and the always changing, always new horizon beyond the force of incoming waves that threatened to carry them off course. There was intimacy with the night—with sea and stars. What are we and our kids going to do when our phones fail and we stand in a wilderness we can’t comprehend? To really find your way in the dark, use a flashlight, a compass and a map, folks! We need to give our children, too, the tools and treasures of seeing in the dark.

When we lived in wilderness Vermont without computers, in deep relationship to hills and woods and seasons, to the wonders of the dark, Arthur and I sat by our campfire into the night—listening to the fire’s sigh and the forest’s whickerings, gazing at the flames and the glittering skies in silence—until one of us might say, “I wonder what the rich folks are doing tonight....”

Seeing in the dark. Fearlessly peering into the deepest well of our own existence, that which is the soul’s wellspring and that of the shadowy black waters of our ego’s churlish defenses. Knowing the realities of these dark hours of our

delusional political dementia—remaining active and informed-- and also knowing and actively engaging the richer realities of the natural world in a splendid darkness that gives our lives perspective—a reality we have failed to cling to as the life saving/life giving balance to the frenetic craziness of our insatiable instant gratification and greed. Stand out under the stars on a magnificent clear night—go to one of our rapidly diminishing Dark Places if you can—and gaze into the star-spun dance of the diaphany of the divine to get your bearings. To get your bearings...know who you are and where you stand, from a perspective of the wondrous Field of which you are a living, dynamic, creative part. And make life choices, daily mundane choices, from that deep spiritual place of Right Relationship.

BENEDICTION: IN THE DARKNESS by Mary Oliver

At night the stars
throw down
their postcards of light.

Who are they
that love me
so much?

Strangers
in the darkness—
imagine!

they have seen me
and they burn
as I too

have burned, but in
the mortal way, to which
I am totally loyal.

Still, I am grateful
and faithful
to this other romance

though we will not ever know
each others' names,
we will not ever

touch.

READINGS: David Whyte's "Sweet Darkness"

Rainer Maria Rilke's "You, darkness, of whom I am born—"